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FOLK-LORE FROM THE SOUTHERN STATES

BY TOM PEETE CROSS

WHILE spending a few months in southeastern Virginia during the summer of 1907, I collected some scraps of negro folk-lore, which I here give to the readers of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*.

An old negro woman in Smithfield (Isle of Wight County), Virginia, informed me that witches sometimes acquire their power by selling themselves to the Devil. His Satanic Majesty gives them a piece of money, and agrees to carry out their commands. Witches may be male or female, young or old. A male witch sometimes causes his neighbor to leave his bed, and then, entering the house, enjoys his wife. A friend of mine from North Carolina told me of a witch who once carried her daughter out on a nocturnal visit. The mother, before starting, imposed on the girl a strict prohibition (probably against mentioning the name of God: I have forgotten the exact nature of the command). On reaching the house which the mother intended to enter, she uttered the words, "Through the key-hole I go!" and they both passed through. While inside, the daughter violated the prohibition, and was unable to return by the way she had come in.

I was anxious to learn, during my sojourn in the South, whether the witch of to-day retains any of the physical characteristics of her sisters of three hundred years ago in England. The result of my inquiries was as follows: The breasts of a female witch are situated under her arms, and the skin about her neck resembles a collar. I learned that a male witch hates to look one in the face; but exactly what physical characteristics he has, differing from men in general, I was unable to discover.

Witches have the power of assuming the forms of various lower animals. I heard from an old negro woman in Norfolk, Virginia, of a shop-keeper who had a personal experience with a witch. His mother-in-law practised the black art. The family lived in rooms above the store, and one morning the proprietor found the old lady crouching down in the form of a buzzard in the corner of the shop. He kept the bird till it changed into its proper human shape.

The following story, which I heard in Smithfield, Virginia, from the old negro woman mentioned above, is of considerable interest as suggesting a well-known cycle of mediæval stories:—

A witch, who became enamored of a man on a neighboring estate, changed herself into a doe and appeared at the "hog-feeding place."¹

¹ In the country districts of southeastern Virginia, hogs are often kept in woods or fields at a considerable distance from the dwelling-house. In the days when deer were more plentiful, they sometimes ventured up to the edge of the woods to feed on the corn supplied for the hogs.

The man shot at the deer, but with no effect. On mentioning the occurrence, he was instructed to load his gun with a four-pence ha'penny cut into four parts. This he did, and succeeded in shooting off one of the animal's feet. In the foot he found a ring, which he recognized as belonging to the woman. Meeting her afterwards, he asked to see the hand on which she usually wore the ring. She at first evaded the request, but on being pressed, revealed the fact that one of her hands was missing.

Witches in Virginia can, of course, enter a house through any opening, large or small, that may offer itself. An old woman told me of a witch who, on being married, asked her husband to unstop certain auger-holes in the floor, doubtless wishing to use the apertures for exits.

The number of chinks in the cabin of the average Southern negro is legion, and it is hence almost impossible to prevent the visits of the plantation witch if she be ill-disposed. The following preventives are, however, useful:—

1. Hang a sifter on the door-knob over the key-hole. The witch, before entering, will have to pass through every mesh of the sifter, an operation requiring so much time, that before she finishes, the hour will arrive when the "extravagant and erring spirit" must hie to "his confine."

2. Place the handle of an old-fashioned broom (made of long straws bound together) across the doorway. (The efficacy here seems to be the necessity the hag is under of counting the straws before entering.)

3. Turn the key sidewise in the hole.

4. Turn your stockings inside out before retiring.

Riding at night is apparently one of the witch's most common performances. As nearly as I could make out, the operation is as follows: The hag turns the victim on his or her back. A bit (made by the witch) is then inserted in the mouth of the sleeper, and he or she is turned on all-fours and ridden like a horse. (Whether the victim is actually transformed into a horse, I was unable to discover.) Next morning the person ridden is tired out, and finds dirt between his fingers and toes. A flax-hackle, placed on the breast of the sleeper with the teeth up, will injure the witch when she mounts, and prevent her from riding. While in Smithfield, I heard of a man who, when he was about to be ridden by a witch, seized the bridle, and forced it into the hag's mouth. She began to shift her shape rapidly, but was severely beaten by her would-be victim.

It is well believed to-day in southeastern Virginia that witches take horses from the stables at night, and ride them furiously about the country. The best indications of a horse's having been ridden is finding the strands of its mane tied together next morning. Two hairs tangled

together constitute a witch-stirrup. The horse is usually tired and nervous after its experience.¹

The following account was clipped from the Richmond (Virginia) "Times-Despatch" while I was in the South in December, 1907:—

"With ashen face and trembling from garret to cellar, Alfred Cary, usually black, rushed into the Second Police Station last night crying, 'She's fixed me; she's fixed me. Come quick, fo' Gawd's sake.' He was breathless with running. 'Fo' Gawd's sake, come quick,' he panted. 'I'll take yer right whar she is.' — 'What's the matter?' queried one of the officers in the station. 'Been conjured?' — 'Yassir. Come on.' — 'Wait a moment, an' I'll take it off you.' But the negro had fled. The officer sprang to the door, but he got only a glimpse of Alfred turning the corner.

"There are many believers in 'conjurin'' still among the negroes in Richmond, and it was only a night or two ago that a negro girl ran breathless up to an officer, and said that she had been 'conjured.'

"'Some gal's got the combin's of my hyar, an' nailed 'em to a tree,' she wept. 'I dunno how she got 'em, but she got 'em, an' she's done nail 'em to a tree.' — 'Pshaw, girl; g'long with you. We white folks burn our combin's.' — 'Yo' white folks don' know 'bout sech things,' she cried; 'but we cullud folks knows all erbout 'em. Dat gal sho' is got my combin's, cos' I'se got de headache. When yo' nails a gal's combin's to a tree, wid de combin's twisted roun' de nail, it sho' gwine give yo' a headache, an' I'se got one orful bad. It 's been achin' eber since dat gal got my combin's.'"

Another curious instance of the terror inspired by conjurers among the Southern negroes occurred, I am told, in Alabama. One negro was accused of having "picked up the tracks" of another. He was in the act of carrying them away when a crowd gave chase, pursued him into a house on the plantation, and were apparently bent on tearing the building down in their effort to get at him, when the proprietor of the estate interfered.

It appears from the above that the public is very much at the mercy of witches and conjurers. I therefore venture to suggest two methods of retaliation which I heard of while in Virginia. A witch can be injured by shooting at an image or silhouette of board representing the one to be punished. (The story of the man and the witch who transformed herself into a doe suggests that the witch may be injured directly by using a silver bullet.) It is of course well known that witches shed their skins in preparation for their transformations. If the skin is then taken and rubbed with salt and pepper, it will do much toward making life

¹ I have heard that in ante-bellum days the plantation "hands" took the horses from the stables without the knowledge of the owner, and used them, thus giving abundant cause for the animals' unkempt and fatigued condition on the following day.

unpleasant for the weird sister when she first gets back into her case.

So far the items that I have chronicled are taken from the witch-lore of Southern negroes, though some of the beliefs are also current among ignorant whites. The following information, which I owe to the kindness of a gentleman from Pendleton, North Carolina, concerns a white woman who was reputed to be a witch.

"The early years of Phœbe Ward, witch, are shrouded in mystery. It is known that she was a woman of bad morals. No one seemed to know anything of her past. She was an old, old woman when this account begins.

"Phœbe Ward had no fixed home. She lived here and there, first at one place and then at another in Northampton County, North Carolina. She stayed in a hut or any shelter whatsoever that was granted her.

"She made her living by begging from place to place. Most people were afraid to refuse her, lest she should apply her witchcraft to them. When she found a house at which people were particularly kind to her, there she stopped and abused their kindness. Hence the people resorted to a number of methods to keep her away. For instance, when they saw her coming, they would stick pins point-up into the chair-bottoms, and then offer her one of these chairs. It is said that she could always tell when the chair was thus fixed, and would never sit in it. Also, they would throw red pepper into the fire, and Phœbe would leave as soon as she smelled it burning. . . .

"Among her arts it is said that she could ride persons at night (the same as nightmares), that she could ride horses at night, and that when the mane was tangled in the morning it was because the witch had made stirrups of the plaits. She was said to be able to go through key-holes, and to be able to make a horse jump across a river as if it were a ditch. She was credited with possessing a sort of grease which she could apply, and then slip out of her skin and go out on her night rambles, and on her return get back again. It is said that once she was making a little bull jump across the river, and as she said, 'Through thick, through thin; 'way over in the hagerleen,' the animal rose and started. When he was about half way over, she said, 'That was a damn'd good jump,' and down the bull came into the river. (The witch is not to speak while she is crossing.)

"To keep the witch away people nailed horse-shoes with the toe up over the stable-doors. To keep her from riding persons at night, they hung up sieves over the door. The witch would have to go through all the meshes before she could enter, and by the time she could get through, it would be day, and she would be caught.

"Phœbe came near meeting a tragic death before her allotted time was out. One night several men of the neighborhood gathered around a

brandy-barrel. As the liquor flowed, their spirits rose, and they were on the lookout for some fun. They went over to where Phœbe was staying and found her asleep. Thinking she was dead, they shrouded her, and proceeded to hold the wake. They were soon back at their demijohns, and while they were standing in one corner of the room drinking, there came a cracked, weak voice from the other corner, where the supposed corpse was lying out, 'Give me a little; it's mighty cold out here.' They all fled but one,—Uncle Bennie,—and he was too drunk to move. When things became quiet and Phœbe repeated her request, he said, 'Hush, you damn'd b—h, I'm goin' to bury you in the mornin'.' The others were afraid to return that night, but did so the next morning, and found Bennie and Phœbe sitting before the fire, contented, warm, and drinking brandy.

"After this Phœbe lived several years, making her livelihood by begging. Her last days were as mysterious as her early life had been."

I conclude with a clipping (quoted in the newspaper whence it was taken, from the "Nashville Tennessean") which is of interest in connection with the use of charms in the South.

"**BLACK-CAT CURE FOR RHEUMATISM.**—'The hide of a black cat dried in an autumn sun and worn around the waist in the form of a belt will keep rheumatism away,' said Mark Duvall, of Alexander, La., at the Hotel Duncan. 'Now, don't laugh, and wait until after you've heard the story. For three years I had symptoms of rheumatism — very painful symptoms. I lay awake nights and suffered a thousand deaths — mentally and physically. One day an old negro working on an adjoining plantation told me of the black cat hide remedy. Of course, I did n't believe in it, but like a drowning man grabbing at a straw, thought I would give it a trial, as I knew the old-time Southern darky to be a real good doctor. I had a black cat killed in October and let the hide stay out for about fifteen days to dry. I then cut it up and made a belt about one inch wide out of it. I put on the belt and wore it for eight weeks. Believe me when I say that my rheumatic pains had entirely disappeared the third week. I have never had a pain since and I still have my black cat belt.'"

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.